Canonical knowledge and common culture: in search of curricular justice

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Abstract
This paper engages with a growing discussion about social justice as applied to school curricula. It examines claims made both for canonical knowledge from established academic disciplines and for the everyday experience and knowledge of working-class or poor communities. The emphasis is on economic divisions, but the principles apply more broadly including race and gender.

The influence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies is demonstrated through a brief history of curriculum models in the English context, to illustrate the different forms an unjust curriculum can take. This is followed by a critique of the Social Realist response, which sidelines vernacular knowledge. A particular focus of this critique is to dismantle the suggestion that non-canonical or 'standpoint' knowledge necessarily leads to relativism.

The vital contribution of vernacular perspectives in extending and transforming academic disciplines is summarised, before showing how this was exercised in the school curriculum, particular in the subject English in the progressive period from roughly 1965 to 1985. A particular interest developed in the everyday knowledge and experiences of working-class communities. The paper ends by outlining some practices and principles which connect canonical knowledge and learners' lifeworld experience to generate socially powerful knowledge.

Keywords: Curricular justice; Vernacular knowledge; Canonical knowledge; Neoliberalism and neoconservativism; Relativism.

Introduction
The tension between transmitting an inherited body of knowledge as formulated and prioritised in elite or selective schools (English grammar schools, the German Gymnasium, for example) and wishing all young people to engage and achieve at school, has resulted in unresolved dilemmas which have been handled differently in various education systems. An emergent debate among international scholars at the European Conference for Educational Research (ECER) and in print (McGregor, Mills, te Riele, Baroutsis, & Hayes, 2017) has raised the issue of 'curricular justice'. This article represents an exploration of the dilemmas involved and possible responses. It focuses substantially on England, but also draws on positive examples from other European systems. Of particular significance is the transformative rethinking of the subject English around the 1970s in England, though now largely eliminated by the standardised National Curriculum. A brief history follows in order to bring out dominant ideologies and trends in a contextualised manner. It is hoped that this will lead to some
international discussion to identify similar and different tendencies and their significance.

In order to understand the tensions and dynamics beyond the phenomenal level, it is important to look at the political and ideological forces at work. In particular, this article seeks to identify neo-liberal but also neo-conservative trends, sometimes acting in opposition and sometimes complementing each other, perhaps with one as the dominant partner. In some ways, these map onto the major drivers behind the original introduction of ‘education for the masses’, namely the requirement for both basic skills and for work-discipline and national loyalty. They are present not only in educational policy, but in the ideologies informing policy in general, particularly at times of dramatic change. Summarising Thatcherism, Phillips (1998, pp. 4-5) argues:

New Right ideology consisted of ‘enterprise and heritage’ (Corner & Harvey, 1991), as well as ‘choice and control’ (Lawton, 1989b), a mixture of neo-liberal market individualism and neo-conservative emphasis upon authority, discipline, hierarchy, the nation and strong government (Levitas, 1986; Whitty, 1989).

Michael Apple’s (2000) analysis of the interaction between neoliberalism and neoconservatism in US education is well known, but it is important to understand that the dynamics work differently according to national context. For example, in Spain the neo-conservative strand involves not an Evangelical Protestant fundamentalism, as in the US, nor a nostalgia for grammar schools, imperial glory and a more settled (pre-1914) middle class way of life, as in England, but looks back to the Franco dictatorship with its aura of traditional Catholicism (Viñao, 2016). It is hoped that readers will look to their own national contexts to identify commonalities and differences.

We might settle on the conclusion of aporia, involving an unresolvable contradiction between canonical knowledge and vernacular culture. However, I believe it is more fruitful to explore some practical ways in which these two aspects or forms of knowledge can be connected to generate powerful knowledge within a curriculum oriented towards social justice.

The term ‘powerful knowledge’ is central to the argument in this paper. It has been used internationally, but particularly in English-speaking countries, to insist that working-class students are entitled to canonical academic knowledge, and that an experience-based or vocational curriculum is seriously limiting. This argument, known as Social Realism and particularly associated with Michael Young, is explained and critiqued later in this paper. Social Realism is not, however, the centre of gravity of this paper, which deals more expansively with ideas and practices which might characterise a socially just curriculum. My argument is that the curriculum espoused by Social Realists is ‘powerful’ only in a limited sense, and fails to empower marginalised young people to engage with social and political change.

Curricular in-justice in England: a brief history

The purpose of this section is to examine various forms that the school curriculum can take which do not promote social justice. Tensions are analysed between the transmission of economically useful skills and social conformity, and in recent decades between neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies. Some examples of resistance are explained.
In the English context, the historic norm, which held from roughly 1870 (the start of universal schooling) to 1970 (the conversion to comprehensive secondary schools across most of the country), was to present most children from the manual working-class with a narrow curriculum on the assumption of their limited capacity to learn and the expectation that most would enter manual employment. Such policies were explicitly reproductive of social divisions:

We do not profess to give these children an education that will raise them above their station and business in life... We are bound to make up our minds as to how much instruction that class requires, and is capable of receiving (Lowe, 1862).

The only compulsory subjects in the beginning were reading, writing, arithmetic and (for girls) needlework and ‘cutting out’. Inspectors visited annually to test reading aloud, neat handwriting, correct spelling and mental arithmetic. After the end of Payment by Results (a primitive accountability system), local school boards were allowed to add additional minor subjects including singing, recitation, drawing, home economics, and elementary versions of geography, history and science. Geography and history were mainly seen as a way to strengthen patriotic and imperial loyalties. Physical training was introduced in 1902, at the end of the Boer War, when it was discovered that the urban poor were unfit for military service. From early in the 20th century, some secondary schools were allowed to add various forms of vocational training. This remained largely the situation until the 1970s. Meanwhile, the grammar school curriculum (for the highest attaining 20%, but including very few manual workers’ children) remained stable and traditional, covering English, mathematics, science, history, geography, French and Latin, with optional qualifications at age 16 in art, music, technical and commercial subjects. Religious Knowledge was mandatory for all schools.

With the spread of comprehensive schools and the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972, serious attempts were made to develop a quality curriculum for all by making academic content accessible and encouraging engaged participation. Various Schools Council projects sought to develop pedagogy and content with an eye on everyday contexts and interests (eg Mathematics for the Majority); to strengthen problem-solving as opposed to simple accumulation of knowledge (Nuffield Biology); and to engage young people with social issues (the Humanities Curriculum Project, built on themes such as Work, War, Love and Marriage, etc.). It should be noted that the tendency in England, over many decades, has been for schools to neglect political education or indeed any studies of contemporary society.

This drive for democratisation and modernisation, based on supported professional creativity, was brought to an end with the National Curriculum, established around 1990. This established a common curriculum, with standardised content and targets, consisting of 11 separate subjects. Conservative politicians deliberately excluded contemporary social issues, even banning the history of the past 20 years, whilst modernising scientific and technical aspects. From the start, there was a tension between technical and scientific modernisation, in accordance with a neoliberal emphasis on education servicing the economy, and a conservative desire for political control. For example, all pupils now had to study a double-weighted Combined Science course to age 16, effectively overcoming previous gender divisions (girls had
tended to choose biology or human biology, and avoid physics and chemistry). ICT was introduced, and the Design and Technology model replaced manual craft courses (woodwork, needlework) in which pupils simply implemented a preset design. At the same time, neo-conservative ideologies within the ruling Conservative Party sought to shape various subjects according to their own values. Authority, hierarchy and nation were emphasized in History (Phillips, 1998) and the education minister promised that children would learn 'the spread of Britain's influence for good [sic] throughout the world'. Canonical content was mandated in subjects such as English and music. Analysing these trends, Ball (1993) spoke of the New Right's *curriculum of the dead*. (See Wrigley 2014 for a more extended account of this period.)

In summary, the National Curriculum brought about a common curriculum, but at the cost of a rigid standardisation. It was built on the traditional structure of discrete subjects, and influenced by contradictory ideologies of neoliberalism and (nostalgic) neoconservativism. Overall the National Curriculum pushed in two directions, reflecting the old tension between increasing economic efficiency and ensuring that future workers remained subservient.

Since then, the situation has become more acute and problematic, with two major reforms moving in opposite directions. The New Labour government (1997-2010), partly through direct decisions but also by intensifying accountability, effectively narrowed the subject range, as primary schools devoted an increasing amount of time to literacy and numeracy and secondary schools were encouraged to provide vocational qualifications for pupils unlikely to enter university. In 2006, the curriculum for 14-16 year olds was effectively divided into two separate tracks. For the 'more academic' a broad and balanced curriculum composed of National Curriculum subjects was emphasised, with all pupils entitled to a social subject (history or geography), a creative arts subject (now including media studies), a branch of design and technology (eg food, electronics), and a foreign language (which could include Asian and other languages spoken by ethnic minority communities). This broad entitlement was deleted for the 'less academic' half of 14-16 year old pupils, and replaced by a vocational diploma starting at age 14. It seems fair to summarise this as a strongly neoliberal solution.

In considering this, we should be clear that the term *vocational* is itself deeply ideological. It is clearly not used in the same sense as when we speak of a priest's or teacher's sense of vocation, nor do we tend to classify Law, Medicine or Architecture as vocational degrees. Vocational is not a neutral term denoting preparation for employment but suggests work of a less exalted and more routine kind. In curricular terms, 'vocational' is counterposed to 'academic'. This has roots in an English aristocratic disdain for the practical, and is not a universal feature of modern capitalism.

A contrary direction was taken by the Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative-led coalition from 2010. The vocational curriculum was abandoned, but more than this, creative and technical subjects were marginalised. A new qualification at age 16, the so-called English Baccalaureate, consisted of English, Maths, science, a foreign language and history or geography (later ICT), but without art, music, drama or technical and vocational courses. Accountability pressures on primary schools were intensified through a
curriculum for English, mathematics and science which sought to make England a ‘global winner’ at PISA by borrowing the most challenging targets from Singapore, Shanghai and elsewhere and imposing them on children 1 or 2 years younger than those PISA victors. An open letter from 100 education academics, known as Too Much Too Young, published on the front page of two major national newspapers, advised that this would lower rather than raise standards, as accountability pressures would drive teachers towards ‘rote learning’ (memorisation).

We are writing to warn of the dangers posed by Michael Gove’s new National Curriculum which could severely erode educational standards.

The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children’s ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity.

Much of it demands too much too young. This will put pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding. Inappropriate demands will lead to failure and demoralisation.

The learner is largely ignored. Little account is taken of children’s potential interests and capacities, or that young children need to relate abstract ideas to their experience, lives and activity.

Mr Gove has clearly misunderstood England’s decline in PISA international tests. Schools in high-achieving Finland, Massachusetts and Alberta emphasise cognitive development, critical understanding and creativity, not rote learning. (Hundred academics, 2013)

The ministerial response was a denunciation of ‘bad academics’ who were ‘enemies of promise’ and moreover ‘Marxists hell-bent on destroying our schools’.

The consequence, when the new curriculum was reflected in 2016 tests, was that nearly 50% of children transferred from primary to secondary school with a failure label in one or more of Reading, Writing or Mathematics - and this despite many hours of test preparation to the neglect of other curriculum areas.

Despite the rhetoric of ‘social justice’ used to market this new curriculum (high academic standards ‘for all’), there were clearly neo-conservative trends within this curriculum, in the sense of a nostalgic return to traditional curriculum and pedagogies.

There is also the privileging of abstract rules over mimetic and experiential learning, which fits the neoconservative ideology: for example, the dogmatic insistence on synthetic phonics as the only way to teach children how to read, and which divorces phonic decoding from literacy as meaning-making and the enjoyment of books. This was satirised by children’s author Mike Rosen as akin to Un-Football - learning to play football without a ball (Rosen, 2012).

An additional test was introduced for spelling, punctuation and grammar, and the quality of writing was judged mainly on formalistic criteria (eg use of semicolons). Despite its virtual absence in English, children were even drilled in how to recognise a subjunctive. A heavy list of grammatical terms is expected to be taught, based on the assumption that children are unable to speak or write until they are taught explicit rules of syntax. The list of spelling rules is simply unmanageable, for example ‘If the root word ends with -ic, -ally is added rather than just -ly except in the word publicly.’ In various ways, abstract rules are privileged over activity, learning explicit rules over mimesis.

This restoration of formal grammar teaching has a resonance in conservative politics in England, being associated both with the ‘grammar school’ (the notion that more able / middle class children should be educated separately
from the majority) and with social order in general. A former deputy leader of the Conservative Party, Norman Tebbit, suggested in 1985 that the abandonment of grammar teaching in schools had contributed to the breakdown of law and order:

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people can turn up filthy and nobody takes any notice of them at school – just as well as turning up clean – all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose your standards then there’s no imperative to stay out of crime (cited Open University, 1991, p. 52).

Spoken English is marginalised in the new curriculum, at primary and secondary levels, and along with drama and modern media. Rather than a problem-solving approach, mathematics consists of fixed algorithms. The accountability pressures have led to other subjects than literacy and numeracy being squeezed, and often abandoned altogether during the final (test) year of primary school. None of this affects the most privileged children who attend fee-paying private schools, and who can choose a less constrained *International GCSE* (iGCSE) at age 16. Indeed, teachers in schools with few pupils from disadvantaged families can more easily resist the pressures of ‘teaching to the test’ and narrowing the curriculum.

History was a major preoccupation of Michael Gove and his allies, but here he overreached himself. His proposal was a curriculum based on a canon of knowledge consisting of a long lists of events, politicians and military victories, in chronological order, and with a heavy emphasis on authoritarian and imperialist figures. Unfortunately he had appointed a well-known historian Simon Schama as his special advisor, but Schama (2013) chose a literary festival to denounce the new plans. Firstly, the amount of content would make it impossible to engage children seriously:

vroom, there was Disraeli, - vroom – there was Gladstone… the French Revolution, maybe if it's lucky, gets a drive-by ten minutes at this rate.

He described as ‘Gradgrindian’ cramming children with so many facts, and ridiculed the arbitrary selection of detail:

There are no key-developments in the reign of Aethelstan, because it's stupid really.

More than this, Schama explicitly challenged the re-emergence of the New Right ‘glorious heritage’ version of English history, and Gove’s attempt to remove controversy from its study:

There is a glory to British history, but the glory to British history is argument, dissent – the freedom to dispute. It’s not an endless massage of self-congratulation.

He was particularly outraged by the offensiveness and insensitivity of the new National Curriculum’s glorification of Empire:

Clive of India… Robert Clive was a sociopathic corrupt thug whose business in India was essentially to enrich himself and his co-soldiers and traders as quickly and outrageously as possible.

In the end, Gove had to back down and sacrifice his tendentious version of History. Significantly, neo-liberalism trumped neo-conservativism. The real political priority was located elsewhere, in the assumed economic functionality of
English, Maths and Science, as indicated by the absurdly detailed prescription in these core subjects alongside the tokenistic treatment of everything else.

A further important feature, reflected in the challenging targets set for very young children, is the neglect of child development, analysed by early education experts as the eclipsing of real children through *datification* (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Formal teaching is intruded into the nursery / kindergarten environment, in a process described as *schoolification* (Moss, 2008; OECD, 2006). Any thought that young children need time to play and grow is dismissed as a hindrance to the PISA global race.

**Social Realism: a curriculum of canonical knowledge**

At this point it is useful to consider the intervention in curriculum studies by a group of scholars calling themselves Social Realists, and operating across various policy spaces (England, South Africa, New Zealand in particular). The best known among them is undoubtedly Michael Young, once at the centre of the 'new sociology of education' of the 1970s, but who has now entirely rejected it.

The Social Realists have made an important challenge to the technical instrumentalism running through neoliberal curriculum policy, including the substitution of low-level vocational skills for cognitive knowledge. Unfortunately, their lack of precision, including a tendency to package diverse trends as a composite enemy (progressive primary schools, vocational courses in schools, interdisciplinary connections, 'leisure, sports and other community interests' etc.) has made it easy for New Right policymakers to co-opt them to their own political project.

Some of the Social Realists' key claims are ill-founded, or at least seem to have slipped between different decades. We are told that 'child centredness has replaced subject-centred teaching' (Young et al., 2014, p. 165), though that is clearly not the case since 1990; the school curriculum of schools now subject to high-stakes testing can rarely be characterised as 'child-centred'. Social Realists see themselves as combatting the relativism of much *progressive* skills-led educational thinking (my italics, Young et al., 2014, p. 165), yet the skills-led vocational courses of recent decades are underpinned by neoliberal demands for more effective human capital production, not progressive educators' sensitivity to children's needs. Indeed progressivism of any kind is nowadays in short supply.

**Divorcing abstract knowledge from vernacular experience**

A further strand of Social Realist thinking, which aligns strongly with the current English National Curriculum referred to in the previous section, is the attempt to divorce abstract knowledge from experience. (See earlier comments on synthetic phonics.) It is of course important to understand that theoretical knowledge cannot be derived from experience alone but requires mediation through concepts inherited from academic traditions (Vygotsky 1987). As critical realists explain (Bhaskar, 1978), what you see is *not always* what you get; everyday experience is not always the best guide to understanding the structures that impact on our lives. Theory is needed to penetrate beyond the empirical and the actual to the real: some of the underlying forces (the real) are immobilised by their context and might not be actualised, let alone be easily visible. As Marx pointed out (1894, ch48):
All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.

However, strange arguments result from attempting to divorce conceptual knowledge from experiential everyday knowledge. In seeking to make distinctions between the two, Young has argued (2010, p. 25):

It is important that the pupils do not confuse the Auckland that the geography teacher talks about with the Auckland in which they live. To a certain extent, it is the same city, but the pupil’s relationship with it in the two cases is not the same. The Auckland where they live is ‘a place of experience’. Auckland as an example of a city is ‘an object of thought’ or a ‘concept’. If pupils fail to grasp the difference between thinking about Auckland as an example of the geographers’ concept of a city and their experience of living in Auckland, they will have problems learning geography, and by analogy, any school subject that seeks to take them beyond their experience. For example, the teacher might ask her class what the functions of the city of Auckland are. This requires that the pupils think of the city in its role in government and business and not to just describe how they, their parents, and their friends, experience living in the city (pp. 25-6).

This is revealing. Instead of using concepts to shed new light on the cities of our everyday experience in order to help us understand the forces which affect our lives, the Social Realists’ desire is for abstract concepts to replace our rich experience, an experience which is almost discounted. As Margaret Roberts (2014, p. 197) points out, the key characteristics of cities cannot be reduced to universalistic generalisations but are highly contextualised. Furthermore, a social selection is at work here: the true functions of the city are judged to be ‘government and business’ rather than the homes, workplaces and lives of local communities. Social Realism, in effect, does damage to knowledge in its attempt to make a binary separation of abstract concepts from vernacular experience, by privileging the former while devaluing the latter - a deeply reductionist view of knowledge.

This is not to say that social realists seek to exclude everyday knowledge from formal education altogether. Rather, they regard it as a pedagogical resource - much as one might contextualise mathematical problems through invented real-world situations or make casual references to some familiar events in order to motivate and engage learners. Although Social Realists allow for everyday examples to aid the explanation of key concepts, they seek to outlaw the world of students' experience as the object of knowledge.

If education is to be emancipatory... it has to be based on a break with experience. (Young et al., 2014, p. 88)

The curriculum should exclude the everyday knowledge of students (Young et al., 2014, p. 97, my italics)

This removes the possibility of students developing an intellectual and critical perspective on everyday situations. By contrast, Nel Noddings' book Critical lessons (2006) shows how an intellectually challenging and socially critical curriculum can be built from themes such as parenting, making a living, advertising and propaganda, other people, and the psychology of war. Another important example of using academic disciplines to shed light on social reality is to be found in Eric ‘Rico' Gutstein's work as a mathematics teacher in Chicago, where maths is applied to students' concerns about housing (Gutstein, 2012).
such 'citizenship mathematics', the focus on housing is not just a pedagogical resource, a motivating illustration ancillary to the main purpose of teaching a corpus of mathematical skills and knowledge. Housing is important in its own right: the curriculum is both mathematics and citizenship, each strengthening and mediating the other.

To insist on a separation between concepts and experience, as Young demands, is to reinforce standard educational processes whereby working-class culture is excluded and mis-recognized, where Indigenous knowledges are denied, where cultural differences are elided and only professional and higher class cultures and knowledges are ratified and become cultural, social and symbolic capital that advantages some and disadvantages others (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2012, p. 99).

We should note that one of Young’s co-authors briefly distances himself from Young’s position, pointing out that:

Bernstein did not dismiss the everyday, but saw that it is the very interchange between expert or disciplinary discourses and ‘common-sense’ or everyday knowledge that is pedagogically powerful (Lambert, 2014, p. 163).

**Rejecting the possibility of knowledge from the margins**

Whereas the New Sociology of Education over-emphasised the partiality and positionality of knowledge, exaggerating the effect of social power even on natural sciences (see Pring, 1972), Social Realism is in denial about social power in academic knowledge overall. It writes off ‘standpoint theory’ as relativism:

If all knowledge is situated, this leads to a relativism which rejects the assumption of there being better knowledge in any field that could or should underpin the curriculum (Young, 2014).

It is true that standpoint arguments are sometimes misleading, and Rata (2012, 105seq) may be right to raise doubts about ‘Maori science’ or ‘Maori mathematics’, if these contradict rather than complement Western science or mathematics - though we should note that she has little to say against the dominance of White majority perspectives and values. This does not mean, however, that standpoint is always relativist (see Zipin et al 2015).

As Harding (1992, pp. 582-3) explains, knowledge from a particular standpoint can be the starting point for developing an objective account: accounts written from a specific perspective provide not only a local or personal knowledge but shed light on society as a whole.

These accounts are not fundamentally about marginal [partial] lives; instead they start off research from them; they are about the rest of the local and international social order. The point... is not to generate ethnosciences, but sciences – systematic causal accounts of how the natural and social orders are organized.

This argument is applied to the school curriculum by Gail Edwards (2014) who insists on the importance of taking working-class pupils’ knowledge and experience seriously and developing critical capacity:

Any school curriculum must be designed to require pupils’ evaluation of knowledge since they must engage critically with pre-existent structures. Given pupils’ standpoint, or structural location, neutrality in knowing is impossible because the
objects of their knowledge include the value-laden social structures and conventions of which they are a part (p. 173).

Thus, standpoint is not a threat but a vital lever towards truth.

In the interests of strong objectivity, then, the experiences of a subjugated group within a particular social structure is a necessary starting point for interrogating reality in as much as this group is likely to pose questions that cannot arise in those groups whose lives are structured from a position of material advantage. This is not to say that the perspectives of working-class pupils are necessarily valid or objective accounts; rather, it is to say only that a critical engagement with reality must take the perspectives and differential power relations within different structural locations into account on the journey towards stronger objectivity in knowing (p. 174).

It follows that young people marginalised by poverty, class, race, gender or whatever cause have a right not only to academic knowledge per se, but to knowledge which helps them make sense of the causes of their oppression and enables them to make a response.

In all the Social Realist texts, one struggles to find an acknowledgement that the curriculum is a selection from culture (Williams, 1961, 66seq), nor any suggestion of the criteria that teachers should apply to selecting, other than trying to keep up with university-based research (See also the later discussion of Klafki, 1958).

Some practical foundations for curricular justice

In the late 20th Century, English schools undertook substantial efforts to raise the achievement and engagement of girls by raising the visibility of women in professional life and in the advancement of knowledge historically. In Fraser's (1997) terms, recognition was important in itself but was also a means towards redistribution and participation. Similar approaches are used in many schools in terms of Black and Muslim minorities. Parallel movements with regard to working-class pupils and communities (Midwinter, 1972; Mackenzie, 1965) were more fragmented and poorly consolidated, and have been largely forgotten. Furthermore, the situation is made much harder by a switch of vocabulary, in policy discussions, from class to poverty or disadvantage: the general political climate, in the neoliberal era, made it harder to assert a pride in being working class, and it is almost inconceivable to be proud to be poor.

The 1960s and 70s did however see considerable movement within the subject English. The pioneering work of Raymond Williams in higher education unsettled fixed notions about the canon of English Literature, and reframed it by relating literary works to a range of other texts including political argument (1958). Williams' family origins and involvement in an active socialist tradition provided a perspective from which it became possible to notice hidden features of classic texts. To provide a simple example, he remarked on the invisibility of manual workers in Jane Austen's novels:

Neighbours in Jane Austen are not the people actually living nearby; they are the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. To be face-to-face in this world is already to belong to a class (Williams, 1985, p. 166).
There was, it should be noted, no abandonment of the literary canon but a greater connectness and depth. This involved interdisciplinary connections between literature and social history, connections between literature and popular culture, and the creative application of marxist understandings of class, as well as Williams' own origins, to throw a new light on literature. This not only made possible new critical understandings of literary texts, it substantially reshaped what it meant to study Literature at university, including helping to establish Cultural Studies as a new field of study.

In schools, initially within the subject English then increasingly as cross-curricular language policy, a network of English teachers emerged to consider curriculum and pedagogy: the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE), subsequently spreading as a national association NATE. Probably the most politically articulate among them, Harold Rosen, working as an English teacher in a London school and later as a teacher-educator, mediated between classroom practices, curricular principles and socialist politics. Some recent publications have made it possible to recover his practice as a teacher (Medway & Kingwell, 2010), along with the dynamics, principles and practices of LATE as a whole (Gibbons, 2014), and at last a collected edition (Richmond, 2017) has brought back into circulation many neglected speeches and texts.

John Richmond, the editor of this collected edition of Harold Rosen’s work, summarises some key principles as follows:

- The content of the curriculum which the teacher brings to the classroom must respect and incorporate the culture, language and experience which the learner brings there.
- Schools as whole institutions need to consider how the language through which they offer knowledge to learners is actually experienced by those learners.
- The great linguistic diversity in our classrooms – and particularly in our urban classrooms – is a resource to be cherished.
- Stories – factual and fictional, autobiographical and concerning the world beyond the self, traditional and contemporary, fabouls and realistic, oral and written, permanent and ephemeral – are a fundamental element of our humanity, both as individuals and as social beings (Richmond, 2017, introducing his edited collection of Rosen's writings).

It was a fundamental principle in LATE that the students’ home dialect must be respected while extending their skills at using Standard English in more formal contexts. Rosen played an influential role in extending this to other languages and creoles. This ran counter to the longstanding assumption that schools should suppress the language of the home and the street.

For the majority of pupils, this has meant that their language is essentially something to be cured, cleansed, purged of deformities rather than extended, enriched, developed. The consequent loss of confidence can only in the end contribute to a process of subordination, since the true sources of the powerful uses of language are withheld (Rosen, 1981, p. 75).

An openness to learners’ own speech is about respect, but more than this, it is a precondition for enabling them to become articulate participants and active citizens. It is also an important condition for marginalised young people in becoming skilled users of the Standard language (Mecheril & Quehl, 2006; Talk Workshop Group, 1982).
Autobiography and local description was the foundation on which other genres of writing were built, rather than teaching impersonal writing as 'composition' by setting arbitrary topics for students to write about within a set time as in an exam. In Rosen's teaching, we see issues such as housing and slum clearance sprouting out of descriptive or narrative genres, until eventually the balance for each pupil shifts towards genres of argument and explanation, though remaining rich in illustration. Douglas Barnes' work in LATE (1969; 1976) established the importance of creating a pedagogic space for talk and authentic discussion, as opposed to answering teachers' closed test-questions. Talk, and a wide range of fictional, documentary and journalistic texts, were used as the stimulus for writing. Technical skills in writing were improved in meaningful contexts rather than through separate exercises. The study of literary works was grounded in novels written for children and adolescents, and English teachers began to engage seriously with popular media, rather than writing it off as a source of pollution (see Rosen & LATE. 1969, pp. 124-8). All of this served to connect 'school English' with the life experiences of the learners, and especially working-class and ethnic minority students.

Such practices require an understanding that the curriculum must be simultaneously embedded and critical, not either / or. Artificiality is avoided in setting pretexts for writing, and routines of meaningless busy-work involving an excess of decontextualised exercises have to be broken. As Medway and Kingwell (2010, p. 764) explain about Rosen's practices at school, the curriculum was rooted in the urban environment, in family life, in the local streets, thus:

asserting the validity as curricular topics of local and specific urban realities...
affirming the worth of the ordinary experience of working-class children and dignifying it through improvised drama, classroom discussion and literary and argumentative writing.

The curriculum might begin in the local streets but that doesn’t mean it ends there, as a naive celebration of the here-and-now. The subject English became a space in the school curriculum which the lives of working-class students were allowed to enter, and where their families and communities were respected. At the same time, the students’ critical and creative capacities were developed (Medway & Hardcastle, 2013; Gibbons, 2014).

Beyond the subject English, Eric Midwinter, director of education for Liverpool (an area of great poverty) and a pioneer of community-related curriculum, explains:

Those who think the community-based curriculum is a recipe for resignation have totally missed the point. By stretching the children intellectually and creatively on the social issues that confront them, one hopes to produce adults provoked and challenged into a positive and constructive response. In short, it is an outward looking attitude not an introverted one. It is intended that, from the stable base of an understanding of their own locale, children can look outwards to wider frames of reference. (Midwinter, 1972, p. 30).

Another example is the Humanities Curriculum Project referred to in section 2, in which older pupils were confronted with texts (fictional, journalistic, documentary, political etc) from opposing viewpoints as the basis for open-ended discussion, with the teacher in the role of neutral Chair. This curriculum was built round broad fields of social life such as work, family, relationships and war; its
powerful knowledge can only be described in terms of an interaction between these fields of experience, diverse political perspectives, textual composition, the construction of arguments, the rights of citizens, and so on.

Situatedness is not in opposition to high cognitive - or indeed, ethical - challenge. Reflecting on the international collection of case studies in their book *Changing schools: Alternative ways to make a world of difference*, Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard (2012, p. 197) argue that:

The search for ‘relevance’ is not in itself sufficient, nor is the proposal that learning be made more ‘experiential’, as both can mean an uncritical assimilation to the status quo. We prefer ‘connectedness’ to ‘relevance’ because it indicates both a respect for students’ knowledges and interests and the need to scaffold learners into other knowledge forms, genres and media from which disadvantaged students should never be excluded. Repeatedly, these chapters point towards an enhanced kind of learning environment, a real learning community. Such environments produce high-quality cognitive development, education for citizenship, and authentic engagement and motivation - knowledge that is more than a drizzle of inert facts and mind-numbing worksheets. They produce learning which is simultaneously grounded and critical. Going beyond the progressive tenet that learners should have opportunities to pursue their own interests, many chapters place a focus on young people’s concerns.

Similar tensions are dialectically sustained in chapters of the book involving place-based learning. It is difficult to separate curricular and pedagogical issues here, as the social realists try to do.

This use of context is not simply decorative or motivational; it is the foundation for cognition and reflective action. It has a strong affective and aesthetic dimension too, and the exploration and direct appreciation of local environments is a necessary means towards gaining a sense of planet Earth. In addition to first-hand experience, Chapter 10 suggests imaginative visualisations, thought experiments and tactile rituals, whereas the students in Chapter 9 benefit from computer-mediated access to distant continents, in tandem with young people from other schools (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2012, p. 198).

Writing elsewhere, Pat Thomson clarifies that, in a world where global capitalism accelerates flows whilst deleting and homogenizing the local, a place-based curriculum:

offers opportunities for schools to explicitly and critically foster identity work through activities and tasks that allow students to encounter embedded social practices and agents that they would normally avoid. By connecting students with different peoples in their local neighbourhoods, teachers are imbricating students in the trajectories of everyday lives which are not simply local, but are also embodied ‘stretched-out’ relations, practices and narratives (Massey, 1994; Childress, 2000; Davies, 2000). Projects such as those described in this paper provide opportunities for situated identity work, as students engage with difference(s) and are encouraged to produce texts in which they describe/inscribe themselves, those with whom they are in dialogue, and their mutual place in the world (Thomson, 2006, p. 92).

Unfortunately the general tendency in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged pupils, or in lower streams which consist overwhelmingly of such pupils, is a disconnected and unchallenging curriculum-in-practice, albeit frequently rationalised in terms of the need to remedy ‘basic skills’. Lisa Delpit is often cited as supporting such practice, but this is a serious misrepresentation: whilst insisting on explicit teaching of technical skills, she argues equally strongly for a critical and creative curriculum and pedagogy.
Students need technical skills to open doors, but they need to be able to think critically and creatively to participate in meaningful and potentially liberating work inside those doors. Let there be no doubt: a 'skilled' minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly (Delpit, 1995, p. 19).

In writing, she points to the strong impact of mini lessons consisting of direct instruction about some technical convention when located within meaningful writing for real audiences and real purposes.

**Opening up spaces for authentic learning**

This section concerns some of the ways in which traditional school learning has tended to close down spaces for authentic learner participation, but also introduces practices which open up opportunities for participation. These are often discussed in pedagogical terms, because they involve the ways in which learning and teaching are organised within the classroom, but they are also significant in curricular terms since they exclude or include the lifeworld of the learner. The question of what makes a 'rich text' for learners is also considered.

The processes of classroom teaching often close down real learning by excluding the learners' voices, perspectives and decision-making. Learning easily becomes alienated labour, in a marxist sense, just as in the factory environment: do this because I tell you, for the next 60 minutes, then hand over your product and you will later receive token payment in the form of a grade. Exchange value substitutes for use value (i.e. use value either in the sense of a product or ideas shared with peers and the wider community, or in the sense of thinking about something which young people feel has any kind of social importance).

This combined process of exclusion and closing down has been well documented at a micro-level, including the consequences of closed questions which only permit the briefest of answers. Such patterns are a parody of dialogue in their reliance on pseudo questions designed to check accumulation of facts rather than to stimulate the learners' thinking and ideas.

However, the process of closure also occurs in terms of decision-making about curriculum content, where the power lies entirely with the teacher - or even further alienated by a curriculum standardised for accountability purposes. In all of this, the learner counts for very little. By contrast, Klafki (1958), within the German Didaktik tradition [please note: this does not mean didactic], points to the need for content and examples to be meaningful not just for the future but to pupils in the here-and-now.

A thematic structure for curricular organisation can open up school curricula to the learner's interests, including establishing an extended period of time for learners to pursue an enquiry. However it is worth noting Peter Medway's (1980) concerns that arbitrariness and trivialisation can result:

Whales, Weddings, September 1939, Australia, Creation, Witches, Cats, Fishing... the important is introduced along with the lightweight, the intimate with the macrocosmic, the near-to-home with the far away...

This should serve as a reminder that generative issues need to be worked through in genuine dialogue with learners.
Following the standardisation of curriculum in England, the need to engage authentically with learners was the first thing that surprised me when reading a Danish official curriculum document (Undervisningsministeriet 1995) for Citizenship / Social Studies: the guidance warned of the dangers of planning for the year ahead, arguing that topics and issues should often come from the pupils themselves. The recommended structure was a form of Project Method practised thoughtfully in many European countries (see Frey, 2007), and quite different from the individualised 'project work' I had known as a young teacher.

The form of Project Method described in the Danish document began with initial stimulus, leading into an extended plenary of whole-class exchanges of knowledge and opinion, before pupils were allowed to make decisions about their independent research. This plenary stage also involved teachers introducing knowledge and methods from academic disciplines which would deepen the independent research.

I noticed some similarities between this and other structures, for which I coined the expression 'open architectures' - they had a shape which held a learning community together, but with spaces of autonomy including individual and small group activity (Wrigley, 2006, pp. 97-109). There are many other candidates for the description 'open architecture': Storyline (Bell, Harkness and White eds 2007); Mantle of the Expert; Augusto Boal's Citizen Theatre; collective forms of Design and Technology; problem-solving involving a real problem raised by the local council genuinely wishing to learn from young people's research and suggestions (Hoppe, 2007). The essential point is that they all create spaces in which participants become genuinely engaged with issues and situations that matter to them; where diverse cultural perspectives can combine with canonical knowledge; and where critical and creative engagement opens doors to powerful knowledge (see also Wrigley, 2007).

As Klafki (1958) reminds us, the issue of canonical texts and vernacular knowledge and experience is not an either-or. The real issue is the flow between them, manifested in different ways. Project Method includes drawing on disciplinary knowledge and methods as tools for learning (Vygotsky, 1987) about a problem which learners find significant, whereas Storyline invites children to research in books from the platform of their personal in-role engagement.

The selection of rich texts is not simply a matter of which text, but of how the learner can relate to them. In the right circumstances, even a comic book can be mobilised as a rich text:

Comic books, then, are rich texts with which to discuss critical themes of power and transformation and through which children can create - and recreate - texts with alternative meanings and narrative structures (Stone, 2017, p. 63).

Conversely, there are good reasons for using classic texts even with marginalised learners. In fact, the CREA network in Spain (eg Racionero and Padrós 2010; Puigvert et al 2012) insist on this for 'dialogic literary gatherings' (a form of reading circle), and present evidence of adult learners being able to discuss ideas which emerge from them, meanwhile feeling pride and confidence that the classics are not beyond them. This does not mean, however, that canonical status in itself makes a text 'rich': a text is rich when it generates cognitive, ethical, political or aesthetic activity in the reader.
The iconic classics of English literature illustrate this point. Dickens' situation at a turning point in the development of urban capitalism makes his books so rewarding. Likewise, Shakespeare's plays dramatise a tension between different ways of looking, including conflicting attitudes towards gender roles, race / racism, citizenship, monarchy and early Empire-building. Their location at the emergence of capitalist society out of feudalism makes them powerful texts for questioning late Capitalism in our own day. Though it is possible to read the history plays as an iconic celebration of Englishness, they can also be read socio-critically: indeed, most of Shakespeare's kings are seriously dysfunctional.

Diverse texts can be deployed in critical social enquiry, and need not be contemporary in order to provide mediating tools, in a Vygotskian sense, that enable learners to engage critically with their own situation. The following texts were used by teachers at the Bielefeld Laborschule to provoke drama, debate and enquiry on the social construction of gender and power:

- a burial speech from 1600 in which the deceased is praised for her ideal feminine characteristics (domesticated, hard working, obedient to God and her husband);
- a poem from 1915 *How our little women must work hard in the war*, which tells little girls how they must support soldiers at the front;
- Hitler’s speech about education, in which he describes the ideal qualities of his Hitler Youth: cruelty, violence, a lack of empathy – they must know how to command and should not be intellectual (von der Groeben, 2008, p. 48).

**Becoming critical: the contribution of marginalized perspectives to knowledge**

A socially just curriculum should not only connect with young people's lives, including those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds. It must also enable them to understand, and take a stand on, power relations in the world. Marginalised communities have a right to understand the forces and structures that exploit or oppress them.

The connectedness with, and ability to critique, social reality go together in a socially just curriculum: this is truly powerful knowledge. The examples presented earlier from Noddings (2006) and Gutstein (2012), as well as the 'funds of knowledge' work of Moll and others along with similar contributions by Pat Thomson (2006), illustrate ways of building coherent, theoretical and critical learning on everyday experience and dilemmas. They provide a practical refutation of the Social Realist claim that vernacular knowledge is intrinsically inferior because it simply presents partial viewpoints - indeed that it is inherently relativist.

Rather, great advances in learning have come about precisely because the author's standpoint has provided a new perspective: Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), or Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), for example. The *Alternative Shakespeares* volumes (Drakakis, 1985; Hawkes, 1996) show how the life experience of female, gay, black and postcolonial writers can generate new insights on this most canonical of authors: their perspectives may be 'partial' but they are not peripheral, trivial or unfaithful to the Shakespeare texts. The socialist perspectives of Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson, Stephen Rose – and indeed Vygotsky - have helped reshape their respective
academic fields, not just as canonical content but in terms of disciplinary procedures.

These alternative ways of reading the word and the world are an essential part of reclaiming cultural capital, so that it is no longer someone else's property. The way in which we do this involves authentic non-alienated learning, which restores voice and agency to learners and especially to marginalised young people. Zipin (2015; 2014) understands the challenge as part of a wider project of capital redistribution, in the face of 'capital's cooptative logic and grammars' and in the face of 'the mutable power of the logic of capital to recuperate and recreate "markets" to serve structurally reproductive functions'. It is essential both to recognise and respect knowledge that derives from everyday situations, and to give marginalised young people access to the canonical knowledge which more advantaged learners deploy as cultural capital. This is more than a contradiction: it resists resolution so much, within our present socio-political environment, that Zipin borrows from Derrida and Levinas the word aporia - 'an unresolvably perplexed tension... a contradiction between two imperatives that are both irreconcilable and indissociable.'

I am suggesting here that a socially just curriculum involves bringing together personal experience and established academic knowledge - connecting the knowledge of living communities to science and theory - in order to give young people power to challenge injustice. This dialectic is more fruitful than the social realists' opposition between canonical knowledge and supposedly relativist 'standpoint theory':

Standpoint theory, when understood as a rejection of neutrality but not objectivity, leads to a view of working-class children's knowledge not as inherently inferior, but as partial. Their knowledge reflects a structural reality within which others may be differently located. Thus, their everyday knowledge is a necessary starting point for enquiry that should lead to a higher reflexive consciousness of their standpoint within the wider world – that is, to strong objectivity. Standpoint theory thus does not reduce knowledge to the knower. On the contrary, it acknowledges the dialectical transaction between subjectivity and objective reality (Edwards, 2014, p. 182).

Such thinking enables us to answer the accusation that a curriculum which involves knowledge beyond a narrowly-conceived canon will trap disadvantaged learners in an economic and cultural ghetto. Aporia does not mean sitting on the fence, but working politically with the painful tensions in creative ways..

Notes

1. This paper could not have been written without the enduring influence of Raymond Williams across many decades. The question of what is worthwhile knowledge has remained central to my work. More immediately, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues Lew Zipin and Marie Brennan (writing with Aslam Fataar) and Gail Edwards for establishing the foundations on which I could build. Gail Edwards' incisive analysis provided invaluable support in the struggle to organise my thinking and develop this paper.

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